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Sites of Resistance and Change: Mapping Contours of Indigenous Feminism

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Abstract: India's Northeast is a unique geographical space inhabited by a multitude of ethnic communities having distinct social and cultural codes and beliefs. An added lure of this land is the wide array of writers, engaged in literary and academic pursuits. This article is an attempt to analyze the interplay of gender, space and agency in the political and social context of India's Northeast. The concept of a regional genderscape as elaborated by Anindita Datta is explored to sketch the regional differences of gendered lives embedded in patriarchal social system. Datta's concept is integrated with the methodological strategy, namely, 'Periscoping', enunciated by the feminist political geographer Nancy Hiemstra. The life-world of female characters represented in the selected story of Temsula Ao, a prominent writer from Nagaland, is analyzed to examine how domestic spaces are negotiated to challenge patriarchy. Datta has attempted to define indigenous feminism as the resistance of women positioned within the genderscape of classic patriarchy, especially in Indian contexts. The story "A Simple Question" by Temsula Ao is analyzed from the perspective of periscoping to examine how gendered subjects create feminist counter spaces and script agency using embodiment as a tool. These feminist counter spaces are non-hegemonic, as they operate against the grain of hegemonic spaces, and they are multilayered, existing both in physical and experiential terms. Again, as Datta says, such counterspaces represent a temporary subversion, and also site of resistance, created by women within classic patriarchy through the deployment of banal everyday acts within the household.

Keywords: *Indigenous Feminism, Counterspace, Periscoping, Embodiment*

The Northeast region of India is a distinct geographical area home to numerous ethnic groups with unique social and cultural norms and values. This incredibly picturesque land is also noted for its linguistic and cultural diversity. The diverse multitude of writers who pursue academic and creative endeavours have also given a privileged status to this region in the literary landscape. The aim of this article is to examine how gender, space, and agency interact within the political and social framework of Northeastern India. Anindita Dutta's concept of a regional genderscape provides the framework to illustrate the geographical variations in gendered lives ingrained in a patriarchal societal structure. Along with Datta's proposals on the linking of gender, space and agency, Nancy Hiemstra's methodological tool of periscopic approach is also incorporated to map the contours of feminist counterspaces. Temsula Ao's story "A Simple Question" is critically examined to analyse how the female character, entrenched in familial spaces challenges patriarchal social and political norms.

The Northeast of India comprising of eight states, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Sikkim, Tripura and Mizoram are loosely aggregated in terms of geographical positioning but social life and cultural holdings of the communities belonging to these states are unique and multifarious. The term Northeast India is a misnomer in so far as it suggests an integrated whole and it only validates a geographical reality. As an exceptional geographical entity, Northeast India, lodged between Myanmar, Tibet, Bhutan and Bangladesh shares 96% of its borders with these countries and only 4% is connected to India. Hence this triangular piece of land has a longer line of international borders than the national border. The topography of Northeast India before colonial time was a shifting space with Tibet and Bhutan to the north, Burma to the east, and Bengal to the west and south. Three valley kingdoms of Assam, Cachar and Jaintia which are now in Assam, Manipur and Tripura existed within this space along with numerous tribal chieftainships in the surrounding hills. Colonial mapping was instrumental in defining territories and transforming frontiers to state spaces. The process of territorialization in Northeast India during colonial era not only delimited geographical spaces but compartmentalized ethnic communities. Due to its strategic positioning and the processes of partition and annexation implemented by colonial administrative regime, the political map of Northeast India underwent frequent and drastic changes. These flimsy political borders have created faultlines in the social and cultural landscape of ethnic communities. As part of colonial governing tactics, non-territorialized ethnic communities were forcibly settled in territorialized spaces. Prior to colonial rule, the tribal groups inhabiting the hilly terrains of Northeast were defined and identified by social and communal boundaries. But colonial cartographic practices created social unrest and discontented ethnic groups as it did not align with state defined political boundaries. As N. William Singh remarks in, *Becoming Something Else: Society and Change in India's North East*, "It was a

failure because the "cartographic surgery" or "political engineering" was carried out without considering the precolonial traditional territories of the various distinct ethnic groups of the region." (xiv). Though all the eight states of Northeast India claim a narrow geographical annexation to mainland India, there exists a wide cultural alienation as each state possesses a vibrant and rich cultural legacy, unique and mismatched to any other Indian state.

The writers from Northeast India have used their creative space to register in the mainstream literary landscape, an inadequately represented region. There are a host of writers from different states of India's northeast who have in their works, represented their respective communities, imbued with a rich tradition of folk songs, myths and tales. The writers have sketched the angst and apprehensions of ethnic groups on encountering the flux and turmoil created by forces of modernization and challenges raised by the interference of nation state on political terms. Their writings are stunning and rendered powerful by a truthful recording of the lives of people inhabiting India's periphery and sensitize readers to the precariousness of borderland existence.

The story selected for analysis has been penned by Temsula Ao, a creative colossus from the literary world of Northeast India. Ao, an Indian English writer based in Nagaland was formerly a professor of English at North Eastern Hill University. She was born in Jorhat, Assam. Her literary output includes memoirs, stories, novels and poems which recount the oral narrative tradition of the people from the Northeastern India. Her major works include the poetry collections *Songs That Tell* (1988), *Songs That Try To Say* (1992), *Songs of Many Moods* (1995), *Songs from Here and There* (2003), and *Songs from Another Life* (2007); the short story collections *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone* (2006) and *Laburnum for My Head* (2009); the memoir *Once Upon a Life* (2013); and *Ao Senla's Story*. Temsula Ao has poignantly documented the lives of Naga communities in her stories. *Laburnum for My Head* received the Sahitya Akademi Award in 2013, and it is a collection of eight stories ranging from the mythical to the modern, delving deep into the human condition. She has portrayed simple but strong-willed women characters in these stories. She believes that a woman's sensitivity would be the suitable medium to bring about revolutionary concepts in a male dominated society (The Thumb Print, interview).

These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone is another collection of ten stories consisting of several strands of Naga culture and history. Many of the stories in this collection chronicle the lives of Nagas existing in the borderlines of violence and amity; struggle and order; of tradition and modernity; of ethnicity and nationality; of life and death. In the preface of this work, "Lest We Forget" Ao states, "Many of the stories in this collection have their genesis in the turbulent years of bloodshed and tears that make up the history of Nagas from the early fifties of the last

century, and their demand for independence from the Indian State.” (x). Besides there are a few stories documenting the traditional Naga way of life. To a large extent Ao unsettles the attempts of essentializing mainstream discourses on Northeastern states as a hotbed of terror and violence or as an eerie fantasy land. *These Hills Called Home* highlights the existence of nation–state as a context in the political imaginaries and social ethos of Naga communities. Their attempts to find safe spaces in the midst of terror are vividly portrayed in these stories.

This article is an attempt to explore the link between space and female subjectivity to examine how agency is scripted in gendered spaces. It also analyses how micro spaces or domestic spaces are instrumental in shaping gender performances. Judith Butler examines the social construction of gender as not biological but driven by repeated “doing “or “performing”. “...gender is a kind of doing; an incessant activity performed in part, without one’s knowing and without one’s willing...” (Butler 1). To this social construction of gender, Anindita Datta has added the role of space or location in ‘performing’ gender. Datta’s mapping of genderscape and the concept of ‘feminist counterspace’ has provided the conceptual framework to analyse the selected stories to examine the interplay of gender, space and agency. She illustrates that gender is socially constructed through a repertoire of performances. “In other words, the geographical or spatial context or to put it simply the *place* in which gender is performed cannot be overlooked and is imperative to its construction. Essentially, therefore, both gender and space eventually cocreate each other” (Datta 2). She also adds, “In this conceptualization, space is not as a passive container but as an active agent in the production and performance of gendered lives and agency” (6).

Further, she identifies regional genderscapes to mean the abstract space, encompassing the lived as well as the imagined space to include all perceptions, portrayals and performance of gender. There are a host of factors operating at regional level like social movements, policy – based intervention strategies that could transform the very nature of these spaces and thereby impact gender norms, women’s position and gender relations (7). Doreen Massey also indicates in “Space, Place and Gender” “Spaces and places are not only themselves gendered but, in their being so, they both reflect and affect the ways in which gender is constructed and understood. The limitation of women’s mobility, in terms both of identity and space, has been in some cultural contexts a crucial means of subordination” (Massey 179). Massey underlines the link between space and agent in impacting gender roles and gender relations.

In her article, “Reinterpreting Resistance and Agency: Excavating Feminist Counterspaces within Indigenous Feminisms,” Anindita Datta proposes a new ontology of agential space to introduce the concept of “feminist counterspace.” She establishes that such spaces are “liminal spaces

within which agency is negotiated, through resistance, resilience, or even by deploying silences or compliances” (Datta 146).

These feminist counterspaces are basically gendered spaces and deemed to be spaces of resistance through which individual or collective agency is negotiated, either to resist or challenge deep rooted patriarchy. She attempts to excavate such spaces to recognize individual and collective agency of women in a patriarchal society for theorizing what she terms “indigenous feminisms”. Datta explains that her attempt to theorize indigenous feminism is for two reasons. First of all, to provide a theoretical framework to hitherto invisible resistance and resilience and to bring such overlooked resistances into the ambit of feminism, to enlarge its scope. Secondly, she believes that theorizing indigenous feminism has its objective as assigning agency to women situated in patriarchal genderspaces. This would lead to define a new ontology of agential space (147).

In her article, Datta also advocates ‘peri-scoping’ a term advanced by Nancy Hiemstra to refer to methodological strategy aimed at revealing and interrogating previously unseen power relations. Datta invokes periscoping to outline feminist counterspaces with an aim to enable readers to perceive agency not as resistant but resilient and acknowledge agency as a product of interventions with an awareness that agency is deeply rooted in gendered spaces (148).

Nancy Hiemstra, a prominent feminist political geographer in the article titled, “Periscoping as a Feminist Methodological Approach for Researching the Seemingly Hidden”, proposes the metaphor of periscope, to suggest that periscoping can be a strategy or tool for interrogating power dynamics and for unearthing and revaluing silenced voices (2). Hiemstra strongly suggests that the metaphor of the periscope can offer a useful methodological tool as she observes, “It is tacitly based on the understanding that space, as well as whatever happens in space, is inevitably embodied. Because neither bodies nor spaces can be contained, these embodiments flow out beyond the original space in unpredictable ways. Through scrutiny of the everyday, these flows and leaks can become the prisms and mirrors of the researcher’s periscope (3).

Hiemstra also highlights three points that make periscoping an innovative research methodology. The first point is the drive that this approach offers the researcher to pursue what cannot be directly encountered or to question the generally accepted boundaries of spaces and times. Periscoping, she considers, is an ongoing process of discovery and development of new and different and even subversive points of access. Secondly, she argues that periscoping is an intentionally feminist research strategy with focus on neglected places, scales and subjects. This is also an inherently political strategy that interrogates power structures. This method involves the use of prisms and mirrors to view things obscured and images produced on viewing through periscope disrupt existing knowledge and

simultaneously create alternative, radical narratives. Finally, she highlights the spatial dimension of periscoping. She states, “Periscoping thus recognizes that even spaces presumed impenetrable are not wholly contained. In other words, the violences of closed doors and covert processes create contemporary ghosts whose hauntings cannot be fully geographically enclosed. A periscopic strategy calls for researchers to employ tools of embodiment and ethnography to spaces previously considered outside the realm of possibility for their use by searching out seepings and broken-off pieces. By setting up the escaped fragments in particular ways, they can be made to reflect enough light from the original space to make it visible” (6).

In this article, the life-world of a female character portrayed by Temsula Ao in the story “A Simple Question,” included in the collection *Laburnum for My Head*, is analyzed to identify how female subjectivities situated in domestic spaces negotiate such gendered spaces to challenge patriarchy. Women belonging to Naga communities share the common history of colonial encounter, and their lives are impacted by the influences of nationalism and insurgency. In the story “A Simple Question,” Imdongla, the female protagonist, is an illiterate but otherwise worldly-wise woman, knowledgeable about the history and politics of her village (Ao *Laburnum* 81). Her father and husband were gaonburahs. The gaonburahs, belonging to major clans, were government agents appointed to maintain peace and order in villages. Though they enjoyed privileged status they were always closely monitored by the Indian army as well as the rebel leaders of underground group fighting against the army (82). The village where Imdongla lived was gripped by terror unleashed by the underground fighters and government soldiers. They engaged themselves in an eternal conflict, and villagers were caught in the hostilities between these two warring groups. On the one hand, the villages where the army set up camps were sought after and villagers punished by underground fighters, and on the other, resisting the entry of army was not an option as government would punish un-cooperative villages. In this critical struggle for power and domination, the life of villagers reached an impasse, often punctuated by violent outbursts.

Imdongla, in the story “A Simple Question,” is rooted in the familial space, whereas the public space of politics is dominated by men—her father and husband being gaonburahs. In the beginning of the story, Imdongla is presented as a character exhibiting stereotypical feminine traits. She is superstitious; she wakes up with an uneasy feeling that something bad would befall her husband because she had a strange dream. She is an ideal wife and a dutiful daughter, well-informed about the politics of the village. It was customary for the villagers to pay ‘taxes’ to the underground leaders, to pay for the travel expenses of rebel group members going outside to fight for the independence of Naga territories from India. Those who protested or refused to give money or what was demanded were severely punished. Once it was Imdongla’s intervention and presence of mind that

saved her husband from being beaten by rebel leaders when they came to collect tax from her house. She was aware of the effects of terrible pressure on her husband as he was preparing to resign from the post of gaonburah. But she alerted him that his resignation would be mistaken as it would label him as a coward and he would be recognized by the government as a sympathizer with the rebels.

On another occasion, Imdongla powerfully barraged the village elders with criticism for their attitude of misgiving about meeting the rebels to plead for tax exemption. When village elders held a discussion in Tekaba's house to plan further dealings with fighters, Imdongla forcefully butted in to advise them to resist the jungle leaders. Tekaba attempted to silence her and indicted her of being naïve. Tekaba tried to hush her, 'Keep quiet, woman, you know nothing.' At this she flared up, "Know nothing? Well, who saved you the last time when you stood there like a statue about to wet your loin cloth? Just think how our daughter will feed her children if they take away what's left after paying their debts to the uncle!" And turning to the other men she continued, And you venerable elders, where is your wisdom? Your courage? Can't some of you go to the jungle and talk to the leaders? Plead with them? Haven't we always given them what they wanted? Ask them for time; instead of rice offer them some pigs and chickens. We can do without meat but we cannot live without rice. Don't you see what's happening to our children and women?" (*Laburnum* 85). This passage in the story clearly indicates the dictates of patriarchy in familial and political contexts. Political space in this story refers to space where political decisions impacting local or national levels are made. Here, in such space participation is not neutral or women are silenced. Nevertheless, Imdongla articulates her concern and attempts to gain participation in male centered political spaces. Ao demonstrates how powerfully this character negotiates such an unequal space of power to challenge normative gender roles. Ao has presented this character to delineate female subjects who are able to script agency within their specific domestic spaces, overriding constraints imposed by gender norms.

As Heimstra has observed that scrutinizing the everyday through embodiment is a key strategy to interrogate power structures. Imdongla crosses the generally accepted boundaries of space by raising questions against the elders and interference in political spaces, is aimed at challenging the rhetoric of political discourses. This participation in hegemonic spaces and becoming the voice of her community, she gains access to obscured spaces and to some extent, subvert existing narratives of power. Here, Imdongla's use of embodiment as a tool for political analysis, helps to identify and understand how political discourses are given forms and become lived experiences that impact people's everyday activities.

Again, when Tekaba, her husband, was detained in the army camp for allegedly assisting underground leaders Imdongla rushed to meet the captain: "... when the captain approached her, she stood up and made as if to take off her waist cloth which he knew was the ultimate insult a Naga woman could hurl at a man signifying his emasculation" (*Laburnum* 86). Here again, Imdongla, now positioned in a militarized masculine space appropriates her body as a tool and site of resistance. She strongly registers her protest by performing such an act which is surreptitious as well as a taboo. Imdongla, the coarse, illiterate village woman could unsettle masculine confidence and challenge the validity of male dominance simply by assuming socially acceptable masculine traits of courage and worldly wisdom. Her personal or female identity reflects traits uncommon in her social role and context. 'What do you want from us?' was the single question Imdongla asked that affected the captain most and persuaded him to release Tekaba and other villagers held captive in the camp. This episode illustrates her adroitness in transcending feminine and gender-specific attributes that could even emasculate an army officer. Heimistra's sketching of spatiality inherent in periscoping is evident in Imdongla's verbal challenge on the military officer's presence in a covert space of power. In her readiness to strip off waist cloth, using embodiment as a tool for resistance, when viewed from a periscopic perspective helps to shed light on unseen spaces of power.

As Datta has emphasized that the tactics of indigenous feminisms are not formal and overt. Women enact their resistance by relying on interpersonal strategies which is often invisible and not permanent. It has to be deployed often to permit a measure of individual agency. Such indigenous feminisms provide temporary and transient agency, and also allow for enactment of resistance. To some extent these indigenous feminisms are synonymous with the conventional mode of protest or resistance. (150). Datta has observed thus: "The use of periscoping as a feminist methodology allows for the recognition and visibility of indigenous feminisms and the feminist counterspaces they operate within" (154).

Here, in Ao's story, deploying Datta's interpretive strategy of periscoping visibilizes unseen spaces of power within which Imdongla's agency is performed. Such space or counter-space, though transient, co-exists in the very spaces of powerlessness. As Datta aptly points out, the performance of such indigenous feminisms using the body as a tool of resistance creates feminist counterspaces: "...indigenous feminisms operate within private spaces. They work subtly to create spaces of power and subversion within the domain of family life. For the bulk of women who remain firmly inscribed within the family, without the wherewithal to negotiate power through formal means or legal recourse for themselves, such tactics become all the more relevant in obtaining some measure of agency" (153).

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